Lesson 9

“The Rule of Three” by Joyce Saricks

FEATURE. First published October 1, 2009 (*Booklist*).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |

When I teach, I can natter on forever about how to think about books and appeal, as well as how to write annotations and do booktalks. It’s crucial to think as broadly as we can about the books we read in order to be open to all possible appeals and audiences, but out on the floor of the library, when we’re face to face with a reader, we need to be able to focus our energies and thoughts.

Fellow readers’ advisor Mary K. Chelton teaches RA at Queens College in New York, and one of her students, Olga M. Nesi, has taken this all to heart. As a school librarian, she became frustrated when students requesting books could only give her elaborate plot summaries, which didn’t help much in discovering new titles they would enjoy. So she and her colleagues started teaching them about appeal, specifically to get her readers to choose just three words or phrases that best describe the book they read.

This is a good technique for all of us who share books. What are the three words that best capture the appeal of the book? I’ve incorporated this into the annotation form my students now use, and I encourage them to use this concept in booktalks as well, as it serves as an excellent place to start thinking about how to share a book.

Now, when I write up notes on books I’ve read, I’m scrupulous in trying to identify the three most important appeal terms. These help me crystallize my thoughts, and I find them useful when I write audio reviews. In creating a booktalk for the Historical Novel Society convention last June, I had an opportunity to try this technique. University librarian and historical-fiction expert Sarah Johnson, Alaska readers’ advisor Georgine Olson, and I each had just enough time to talk about 10 books in 10 minutes. What to say to give a taste of plot but also hook a reader with appeal? As I went over my notes on my chosen books, I tried to pull out the three chief appeals and build my minute around those.

In selecting these appeal terms, start with pacing, then tone or mood. These are frequently the chief factors that affect our reading pleasure. Even though we may not be conscious of how pacing affects us, it is often the reason a reader likes one title and not another with a similar plot. Tone or mood is more nebulous but equally important. Upbeat or dark? Brooding, moody, claustrophobic, disturbing or comfortable, evocative, gentle, heartwarming? Tone often sets the stage for the characters and actions and influences readers’ perceptions of the type of story. Mood is almost always a vital ingredient in the appeal mix.

In this experiment, pacing was seldom a factor. These are historical novels, and readers expect a certain pacing, generally more measured and stately, although adventure elements sometimes quicken the pace. Tone and setting resonated more in this genre.

Here’s an example of the booktalk for Frank Tallis’ The Liebermann Paper series, historical mysteries set in early-twentieth-century Vienna. My notes identify three compelling appeals: the intricate mystery, the brooding atmosphere, and the fascinating historical details.:

Whether you know Vienna firsthand or only through fiction, this historical-mystery series will take you there. Well, not to today’s Vienna, but to the sparkling fin-de-siecle Vienna at a time when trouble is clearly brewing, and Emperor Franz Josef wants cases solved. Quickly. And intriguing, gruesome mysteries they are. Freudian psychiatrist Max Liebermann assists Detective Oskar Rheinhardt in solving crimes that draw from the worlds of politics, secret societies, music, and art and take the protagonists—and readers—through the streets of Vienna, from the world of great wealth to the city’s seamy underside. These books remind me of the recent movies The Illusionist and The Prestige, with the brooding, moody atmosphere and unsettling events. They give an excellent sense of Vienna—locations, food, cultural and social life—but elements that will eventually give rise to the Nazis are already evident here. Intriguing mysteries share the stage with well-drawn characters in politically dangerous times. There are three titles to date: [*A Death in Vienna*](http://www.booklistonline.com/ProductInfo.aspx?pid=1514572), [*Vienna Blood*](http://www.booklistonline.com/ProductInfo.aspx?pid=2335411), and [*Fatal Lies*](http://www.booklistonline.com/ProductInfo.aspx?pid=3094198).

Another example is this annotation for Bernard Cornwell’s [*Agincourt*](http://www.booklistonline.com/ProductInfo.aspx?pid=3082372). The key elements that struck me were the dark and gritty tone, the “you-are-there” narration through the eyes of the archer, and the layered story:

Cornwell’s most recent historical adventure is a lyrical, compelling novel of war with a strong antiwar message, a brooding hero, realistic and graphic battle scenes, and fascinating historical detail. Although famous historical figures appear (including, of course, England’s Henry V), the novel is told, appropriately, from an archer’s point of view, since it was the archers who saved the day for England in that battle. Cornwell provides a “you are there” feel with this intimate view of activities through a soldier’s eyes. As usual, he appends a detailed historical note, discussing his sources, the issues he faced in interpreting them, and the general lack of precise information. Cornwell is at the top of his form in this darkly atmospheric and gritty tale of war and a soldier’s life, surely a hell whether he wins or loses.

One of the greatest challenges readers’ advisors face is how to remember enough about a book to share it with readers days, months, and even years after we’ve read it. Appeal helps us do that—even those of us whose memory isn’t what it was 20 years ago. Try the rule of three as a way to focus your thoughts about a book. Whether you keep extensive notes or use an online database to keep track of your reading, add these terms as special tags. They can become the cues that start the conversation as we share books with readers.